

# Tennessee State Parks Strategic Direction

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a Vision  
for the Future



# Tennessee State Parks Strategic Direction

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# Introduction

Our state parks are invaluable assets – a joy to all who use them now and a priceless legacy to hand down to future generations. As the state park system enters a new century, it is clear that a strong statement of mission and strategic initiatives will be vital to effective park management in the years ahead. This document provides strategic direction to assure that parks will be properly protected and clarity for our employees, legislators and the public so that all our programs and activities support the park system mission.

This document begins where it all began -- with the Enabling Legislation that formed the

Tennessee State Parks system in 1937. This enabling legislation provides a firm foundation on which to build the state park Mission Statement. The Values, Vision and Core Beliefs further define the Mission Statement and explain the “why” of what we do. Finally, the Strategic Initiatives section of this document sheds light on our current priorities, which we intend to build on in the coming years.

We are confident that this document will provide the essential direction needed to assure that our state parks would be properly protected and managed for the use and enjoyment of Tennesseans and their guests for many years to come.



**Great Stone Door at South Cumberland State Recreation Area**

## Enabling Legislation

Tennessee State Parks was established through legislation in 1937, and those laws, with modifications and additions over the years, are still the framework of park operations today.

*“Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, that for the purposes of the Tennessee Department of Conservation the term ‘park’ shall mean and include any and all areas of land, heretofore or hereafter acquired by the State, which by reason of having natural and historic features, scenic beauty or location, possesses, natural or potential physical, aesthetic, scientific, creative, social, or other recreational values; and is dedicated to and forever reserved and administered by the state for recreational and cultural use and enjoyment of the people.*

*“Be it further enacted, that every park under the provisions of this Act shall be preserved in a natural condition so far as may be consistent with its human use and safety and all improvements shall be of such character as not to lessen its inherent recreational value.” (source: Tennessee Public Acts of 1937, Chapter No. 266, Sections 1 and 2.)*

The primary purpose of state parks is to conserve natural, aesthetic, cultural, and historic resources, to provide opportunities for enjoying healthful outdoor recreation and to serve as outdoor classrooms for environmental and cultural resource education. Some state parks contain extensive infrastructure to provide the public with a quality recreational and educational experience to support those visitors seeking more comfortable accommodations.

## Mission

The following Mission Statement guides Tennessee State Parks.

***Mission:*** *To preserve and protect, in perpetuity, unique examples of natural, cultural, and scenic areas and provide a variety of safe, quality, outdoor experiences through a well-planned and professionally managed system of state parks.*



### Pickett State Park

## Values and Vision

The Mission of Tennessee State Parks is based on the following values and vision.

**Values and Vision Statement:** *There is inherent value in the natural environment. The observation and experience of natural things in a setting removed from the hectic world of the day-to-day can uplift and re-create the human spirit.*

*There is also value in physical reminders of the past. Without history, there is no context upon which to base an understanding of the present or dreams of the future.*

*Tennessee's natural and cultural resources provide perspective and continuity to our lives to help make us whole. The intrinsic worth of these resources is beyond monetary consideration. Even if a person cannot travel to a state park, there is value in knowing that these special places exist and will be protected for future generations to experience.*

*These places are so valued that we intend to preserve and protect them, even in the face of whatever may be the fashion of the moment, to the end that all citizens, rich or poor, may enjoy them forever.*

# Core Beliefs

## Resource Protection and Maintenance

As stewards of the natural and human-made resources of our parks, the employees accept responsibility to protect and maintain them. In a state with growing population and development in all areas, conservation of representative biological communities and preservation of historic and cultural resources is a vital part of Tennessee State Park's responsibility. We resolve to pursue exemplary planning, design, construction and maintenance of

physical resources and support facilities, consistent with the mission to "preserve and protect". Development is limited to those facilities necessary to provide safe and comfortable use by park visitors. These facilities have unique maintenance needs that require action appropriate to their park setting. Facilities will be designed to blend in with the natural environment and will demonstrate more efficient use of energy resources.

## Resource-based Recreation Opportunity

Our parks offer a wide variety of resource-based recreation opportunities and programs, which we believe should be affordable and accessible to the public. The outdoor experience is uniquely capable of positively affecting the lives of people by promoting health and well being, and an awareness of the environment. The programs we deliver are consistent with each park's interpretive themes and designed to support their unique mission. Programs and activities will do no harm to the natural and cultural resource of the park. Instead, programs and activities will serve to enhance the visitor's experience and understanding of the resource each park protects.

**Core beliefs:**  
Principles that are widely shared, that operate unconsciously, and that are considered nonnegotiable.

## Visitor Service

The needs of park visitors are important to us. Park staff are committed to visitor safety and security while creating a healthy, inviting setting for all to enjoy. The facilities are accessible and clean,

and the staff is friendly. We will work to make it easy for visitors to do business with us, but protection of the natural and cultural treasures placed in our care must remain paramount.

## Natural and Cultural Interpretation

Exploration of wild places promotes self-esteem, problem solving, confidence and caring. When people gain knowledge and skills about environmental issues, they become better motivated toward protecting the earth's limited resources. When visitors experience and learn from our natural and cultural resources, it can help them to gain a sense of place and a stronger sense of history and

identity. Visitors gain appreciation through education. Interpretive themes and exhibits are developed for each park and programs are provided which are consistent with those themes. These programs are a vehicle for personal growth and discovery. Visitors should have the opportunity to learn about each site and interact with interpretive personnel.

## Partnerships/Teamwork

Within Tennessee State Parks, partnering with other agencies and in cooperation with communities and the private sector, we collaborate in an effort to provide for the needs of visitors and our state's resources. We believe our organization shares the goals of other public, private and nonprofit organizations. Tennessee State Parks is committed to

networking with other recreation providers to provide a seamless system of recreation opportunity across the state. Working together can ensure appropriate use and conservation of resources, maximize funding and provide needed public services within the mandate of the agency.



## Camping at a Tennessee State Park

## Excellence and Integrity

Services and facilities are provided in a manner that demonstrates the importance of our mission. Decision-making is transparent and based on facts and science. Policies are data driven and consistent with the mission to “preserve and protect.” The public is served in an honest,

ethical and forthright manner by keeping promises and enforcing rules and regulations evenly. Excellence, leadership, integrity, economy, effective communication, responsible innovation, and continuous improvement are our standards.

## Employee Growth and Diversity

State Parks jobs are challenging opportunities. We are committed to providing the tools, resources and experiences necessary to help employees develop new skills and to enhance their capabilities and quality of work life. Each employee is respected as a full organizational partner and participant in the delivery system of our mission. There is

diversity in the workforce, which is representative of the citizens of our state. The work of exemplary employees is acknowledged, many of who feel a sense of calling to their occupation. Employee creativity is valued, and it is understood that creativity means taking risks and learning from mistakes.

### Core Programs

- Resource Protection
- Education/Interpretation
- Resource-based Recreation

### Support Programs

- Public Safety
- Hospitality Services
- Facilities/Maintenance



# Strategic Initiatives

## Professional Management

For the first time in many years, Tennessee State Parks has focused on having career parks and recreation professionals at all levels of park management. The current "CEO" has a parks background. A new management team has been assembled whose goal is to optimize the natural, cultural and outdoor recreational assets of the park system for the benefit of all citizens, residents and guests. This new management team includes a strong resource management unit, and a more efficient management

organizational structure that utilizes three operating districts. Park Rangers meet professional standards that will prepare them to be future Park Managers. Many of our hospitality staff hold the "Certified Hotel Administrator" certification, as well as others. Park stakeholder groups have advanced the cause of management professionalism for many years and we are confident in the positive outcomes that will result from this initiative.



## Roan Mountain State Park

### Taking Care of What We Have

The most cost effective way to improve outdoor recreation opportunities for Tennessee is to maintain and make the best use of existing resources. Tennessee State Parks are plagued with a backlog of maintenance projects that must take

priority over new construction whenever possible. Adaptive re-use of facilities should be considered when feasible. Park boundaries are at risk of encroachment as development grows closer, disrupting viewsheds and critical

habitat. We will fix the basics including hiking trails, picnic areas, campgrounds, swimming and other water access areas, signage and exhibits. Updated inventories of all

resources, including an all taxa biodiversity inventory, are currently underway, so that decision making is based on sound information.

## Research Dedicated Funding

Other states may be able to provide successful examples of how dedicated funding could be used to provide secure sources of financial support for Tennessee State Parks. Such funding may be considered in conjunction with efforts to provide for

the backlog of renovation and maintenance needs. Such options may include a tax on recreation-related equipment, dedication of one penny from the state gasoline tax, or a state bond issue for maintenance.

## Focus on the Natural and Cultural Resource

Tennessee State Parks is steward to some of the most unique natural and cultural treasures in the state and in some cases, in the world. Resource based recreation and the natural, outdoor experience continue to be what attracts visitors to state parks. The emphasis on lodging and restaurant complexes, which serve as an attraction in and of them, may distract visitors from the experience of the natural and cultural resource. In contrast to the hectic modern life, state parks provide a tranquil and timeless experience outside the daily

routine. The mission of Tennessee State Parks clearly reflects that the commitment to resource stewardship comes first. This commitment is reflected in our efforts to landscape with native plants, remove exotic invasive species, mow less, restore native habitats and conserve biological diversity. Additionally, a Natural and Cultural Resource Management section was organized during 2003 and new policies are under development to better address these concerns.



**Reelfoot Lake State Park**



## **Standing Stone State Park**

### **Encourage Volunteers**

All Tennessee state parks have been affected by decreasing budgets and staffing levels. A non-profit organization dedicated to generating additional support for a given park can be an important resource to the park system. In 1993, Tennessee passed legislation authorizing private, non-profit groups to organize for "maintaining and enhancing the purposes, programs and functions of the state park system". These groups, more commonly known as Friends, are concerned citizens who have organized to assist in protecting, preserving and promoting

their favorite state park. Individual volunteers and donors also contribute time and resources to enrich state parks. They may work as campground hosts, on trail building projects, do maintenance work, or programming. To better enable Tennessee State Parks to utilize volunteer labor, two staff positions were assigned to friends groups and volunteers in 2003. Another possible option for the future may include the establishment of a State Parks Foundation to raise an endowment from corporate, foundation and private donors.

### **Marketing Park Authenticity**

For Tennessee State Parks, our competitive advantage in the marketplace lies in the ability to sustain and promote our authenticity. By the very nature of who and where we are, state parks are unique. Unlike destination properties in the private sector, state parks are limited in their ability to closely follow consumer trends. Parks have neither the capital nor operating flexibility to keep pace with many of the current trends that drive private

sector operations. Attempts to stay "current" in the popular market, should not come at the sacrifice of features that give the parks a long lasting presence in the marketplace. Our "brand identity" is grounded in Tennessee State Parks mission and history and is evident in everything we do. Tennessee State Parks has a consistent image that we present to the public to reinforce our commitment to the state parks mission.

## Hospitality Services – A Valued Investment

Over the years, Tennessee State Parks have made significant capital investments in facilities such as inns, restaurants, conference centers, golf courses, and marinas. These retail facilities should not be thought of as “profit-centers”, but as a service. They exist to provide a comfortable place for park visitors to stay and enjoy outstanding recreational opportunities, while they explore the

wonders of nature. Our goal is to hold the line on fees and charges and to provide a value to our visitors. Hospitality Services will focus on providing a special service to the public, enjoyable activities, comfortable facilities, friendly staff, moderate costs, and a break-even financial situation that is not a burden to the state.



### Fall Creek Falls State Park

#### Greener Parks

A growing energy crisis and a national discussion about the future of our natural resources are bringing the impact of our energy choices closer to home. Our commitment to resource protection and concerns about air and water quality in Tennessee, coupled with our efforts to be good stewards of the taxpayer dollar, compel us to reduce waste and save energy. Among the initiatives under consideration or in the early phases of implementation are partnering with Johnson Controls, Inc. to develop strategies for energy conservation; participation

in TVA's Green Power Switch Program; the use of "smart meters" to monitor energy use, a "trash-free" parks pilot program; expanded park recycling programs; the use of alternative fuel and hybrid vehicles; the use of photovoltaic cells and geothermal; and buying, selling and using "earth friendly" products. As a first step, park staff at all levels are encouraged to share in this mission and look for environmentally responsible initiatives in their own areas. In new construction, energy efficient alternatives are included in the design.

## Acquisition of Special Places

Tennessee State Park lands are heavily used in many places. An aggressive program of land acquisition, conservation and protection is necessary to keep pace with expected population increases. Development and urban sprawl outside park boundaries is a growing concern. These activities pose an encroachment threat to park watersheds, viewsheds, air quality, water quality, wildlife habitat, and overall park boundary integrity. Particular attention needs to be paid to the acquisition of in-holdings,

buffer zones, and unanticipated but high quality new land protection opportunities. A first step in this process is currently underway and park staff have taken a lead role in the development of a State Land Inventory and Assessment Plan. Central to the plan will be the coordination of acquisition and stewardship activities with other public and private partners, including TDEC's State Natural Areas Program, in a state-wide effort to connect green spaces

## Making the Most of State Parks as Classrooms

Tennessee State Parks offer a unique opportunity to serve as year-round classrooms for environmental and cultural resource education. These efforts should be afforded greater attention to develop a knowledgeable citizenry that can compete in the global economy, with the skills, understanding, and inclinations to make well-informed choices. Quality environmental and cultural resource education programs facilitate the teaching of

science, civics, social studies, mathematics, geography, language arts, etc. These skills will foster a renewed commitment for all citizens to become better stewards of the natural environment and historic resources. State Parks are well positioned to assist with university research, teacher training with local school districts, development of classroom curriculum and Web-based educational programs.



### Nature Education at a Tennessee State Park

## **Improve and Maintain Exhibits and Interpretive Signage**

Interpretive exhibits and signage are some of the most basic media in the interpretation of a park, natural area, archaeological area, or historic site. These media allow for visitor access to the important interpretive themes at these sites, as an extension of the staff. Exhibits, on the more expensive end of the budget spectrum, offer information and interpretation, and allow for the display and protection of objects that

are often delicate, rare, or unique. Interpretive signs and kiosks are limited to two-dimensional presentations but are adequate for telling much of the park story in a more economical way. Exhibits and interpretive signage are tools to communicate with the public when staff may not be available and must be well thought-out and well maintained to be effective.

## **Utilizing GIS and GPS Technology**

Geographic Information Systems, or GIS, is designed for storing, updating, analyzing, displaying and manipulating information about places on the planet. This system uses the power of the computer to answer geographic questions by arranging and displaying all kinds of data in maps, charts and tabular formats. This state-of-the-art technology is a useful tool in resource planning and decision-making and is considered the

industry standard in resource management. GIS technology is a common language that enables different agencies to share resource related information. Global Positioning System, or GPS technology, can be used to provide information about locations to document important inventory or boundary related data. GIS/GPS technology is currently being used to inventory resources and facilities in state parks.

## **Park Management Plans**

The Tennessee state park system is composed of a wide variety of park types. There is no “one size fits all” strategy for park management and all parks are not designed to provide all services. The management of such a diverse operation requires that all park staff, particularly Park Managers, have reliable information and clear direction on the management of these sites. Staff must have a clear picture of the management philosophy of the

organization as a whole and understand the importance of the individual site within the larger system. To better enable park staff to focus on the mission of resource stewardship and service, a Park Management Plan for each individual park will be developed and utilized in the management of Tennessee State Parks. The Park Management Plan forms the foundation of the effective management of Tennessee State Parks.



## Public Involvement and Restoring Confidence

Tennessee State Parks is committed to public involvement and restoring the confidence that our citizens have placed in us through the years. Renewed efforts must be made to remind the public that all state parks are now reopened and to raise Tennessee State Park's profile as a leader in the stewardship and protection of natural and cultural resources. Public opinion is important and park staff will utilize surveys, public workshops and other mechanisms to maintain open communication and increase public awareness of the role that state parks play in Tennessee. We will

continue to rely heavily on the Tennessee State Parks Web site, park brochures and *The Tennessee Conservationist* magazine to provide information and promote the Tennessee State Parks system. In recent years, state parks were used as bargaining chips in a larger political debate. All parks were affected by park closures which saw the partial or complete shutdown of public access to park lands. This action caused significant ill will in communities all across the state. Every effort will be made to mend this relationship with the public.



**Cumberland Mountain State Park**

## Conclusion

The value of the natural and cultural resources of Tennessee is invaluable and our responsibility is clear. The proper care of these resources will take time and a coordinated effort between Tennessee State Parks, the Tennessee General Assembly, and the public. The directions have been determined. Over the coming months and years, these policies will establish the foundation for a state

parks system that is second to none. The citizens of Tennessee can look on their state parks system with a sense of pride, knowing that our efforts today will ensure this legacy is protected for future generations. Thank you for your interest in Tennessee State Parks and for taking the time to read this report. We invite you to join us in making this vision a reality.

Visit a state park near you and  
enjoy our good nature!

